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On Elevators

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We were at the AMC Theatre in downtown Fort Worth, and since I never go downtown the same way twice I could not tell you how we got there. I can find my way to Sundance Square every time but I can not tell you street names or which way to turn; I just follow my instinct. I came home for a visit, and my mom talked me into taking her to a movie. The girl who took our ticket was short, and it was her first day of work—so she told us—and my mother kept saying that over and over: to the woman who answered our call from the elevator, to the policeman who came to let us out. "It was her first day, she didn't tell us how to use the elevator." Anything to shift blame, anything to forget that she, my mother, was the one who decided to "try out" the elevator and if it didn't work correctly to ask for help. We got on the elevator at the street level, and you could either go one story up or one story down. Oddly enough, there was an escalator, but only to go up. We were going down. The elevator moved about three feet and then it stopped, and I don't know when or how we decided we were stuck, but when the inner doors opened to show that the outer doors would not, my mother's face went ashen and she began to pace though she had nowhere to go.

The first hydraulic elevator was installed in 1878. I imagine that the elevator we were stuck in was hydraulically powered, because the encyclopedia tells me most elevators in buildings under five stories are. My mental image of the mechanics of a hydraulic elevator is still a little fuzzy, but the passenger (or freight) car sits on top of a plunger, which rests in a cylinder buried in the ground. Pressurized water fills the cylinder when the elevator needs to go up, and is released from the cylinder when it needs to go down. Where they keep the water, I don't know. Another cylinder, side-by-side? More wasted space?

I once walked through the home of a woman named Kathy, an octogenarian and survivor of Hurricane Katrina. She took me through

each room of her apartment (which is on the tenth floor, overlooking the Garden District) and showed me what survived the storm and what was "new"—gifts from nephews and friends, maybe even a stranger. A table survived, one with wrought iron legs and a marble top, given to her when she taught there. How she got it back to the states, I don't know. Every other piece of furniture was made of wood and disintegrated from sitting in eight feet of water for so many days. A few pictures survived that her husband (an amateur photographer) had taken—the streets of Germany, Jackson Square in the rain, and a streetcar on St. Charles Avenue covered with snow. It was a long time ago—1962 maybe—that New Orleans actually experienced a white Christmas. It is easier for me to picture New Orleans covered with several feet of water than it is for me to picture the city covered in inches of snow.

Hanging on the wall in Kathy's apartment are 12 plates from Boehm Porcelain studio—a well-known collection with different types of birds. The birds are nothing extraordinary to me, but Boehm was famous and talented, and I suppose that is what matters to Kathy. She and her husband bought the plates one at a time on their wedding anniversary, starting with the first. It was either right after the first one was bought, or right before the last—I can't remember—that the designer died and the plates significantly increased in value. The water spilled into New Orleans and filled Kathy's Lakeside home gradually, slowly enough to lift the plates off the walls and cushion them with mud. The water left as slowly as it came in and after the mold was washed off, the paint wasn't even scratched. The same can be said for Kathy's porcelain dolls—they came from Germany or France, somewhere far away, and they wore green dresses with red aprons and kerchiefs tied around their heads. Eight feet of water and only the most expensive items in her home survived. I wonder if it matters to her, if there was enough sentimental attachment to these items that were so outwardly valuable, or if she would trade them for her hand-made quilt or postcards or maybe a family Bible. Kathy went to church but her husband did not, though he photographed all of the weddings.

Being stuck in an elevator is one of those experiences that you don't really recognize until it has already been happening for some time. One minute you are getting off of your cell phone, stepping onto an elevator, pushing the button; the next minute you feel warm, like there isn't enough air to breathe; and you are trying to keep your mother from passing out; and at the same time you are wondering, "Are we really stuck in an elevator?" In the movies these moments are always life changing. You get off the elevator and you break up with your significant other, or you propose, or you finally buy that house you've been wanting or you cut your hair and decide that it's okay to be single—and then, of course, Mr. Right waltzes in the very next day. But in the end, it was an elevator, it was ten minutes; Mom paced back and forth and I quoted William Carlos Williams to take her mind off the situation. I talked about plums and chickens and afterwards I walked out and saw the Anthony Hopkins film I came for. I re-tell the story with gusto, with a little exaggeration, with hand motions, just for laughs.

I checked out a book from the library, one full of graphs and blueprints and equations. It talks about the structure and mechanics and other nonsensical things that I will never understand. On the first page it says that safety, reliability, and efficiency should be characteristic of all elevators. According to some government source, the number of elevator-related deaths for passengers from 1997–2003 is only 39. A 76-year-old woman was once stuck in an elevator for six days. She even welcomed in the new year—1988—from that passenger car. The article says nothing about her health, but it also says nothing about her death. I do not know how she managed to live six days without food and water, and I wonder if she was able to sleep, if she thought she would never make it out, if she did something after getting out that she never would have done before. Everything I have read about elevators is written in a language I don't understand—a language of science and technology, with words like pneumatic lifts, sprockets, and worm diameter. Information on worm diameters and worm gear drives is found on page 162 of Lifts, Elevators, Escalators and Moving Walkways/

Travelators, but that page is missing from the copy I have.

The first commercial elevator was built in 1850 but used only for freight because the ropes snapped so easily. In 1853 Elisha Graves Otis introduced a safety mechanism demonstrated at the Crystal Palace Exposition in New York. When tension was released from the hoist rope, a clamping mechanism would grip the guide rails. It was this safety device that allowed for the first commercial passenger elevator to be installed in the Haughwout Department store in New York City in 1857. By 1903 elevators were being installed in private homes, and in 1949 the first elevator to be powered completely by electricity ran in tall, busy buildings. Modern elevators have a counterweight that balances each car along with 40 percent of its capacity. The cylinders of hydraulic elevators must be as deep as the building that the elevator services is tall—how long does it take them to dig a 60-foot hole, and how wide is it? I can't imagine pouring gallons upon gallons of water, a natural element, into the earth in a concrete compartment to run a man-made machine. How much nature has been destroyed to accommodate the sky-rises that we can now easily access, thanks to modern invention? Mom and I took the escalator back up to the street level after the film. I don't remember the next time she got on another elevator, but it was only a matter of days and sometimes I wonder if she has forgotten about the incident.

Places with a high population of orthodox Jews have "Sabbath" elevators, which stop automatically at each floor, allowing Jews to get on and off without doing "any useful work"—i.e., pushing a button. Some high traffic buildings have double-decker elevators, allowing passengers to get off and on two different floors simultaneously. Some double-decker elevators use one car for freight and the other for passengers, eliminating the need for a separate freight shaft. One variety of elevators operates from a central dispatch area and contains no buttons on the inside of the car. I cannot imagine being stuck in an elevator with no buttons—it's one thing to push buttons, the first floor, the third floor, the door-open button, to push them knowing you aren't going anywhere, but to still be able to push them. It's a

completely different thing to stare at the steel panel knowing you can't even put on the appearance of doing something.

Early elevators, and by early I mean pre-1950, required an operator. They were controlled by a cake-pan-sized motor with a projecting handle. These elevators had no automatic landing mechanism, requiring good timing on the part of the operator. In New Orleans I used to ride the "oldest" elevator in the city once a week—who knows if it really was the oldest, but it did require an operator and some were better than others at stopping it in the right location. Sometimes you had to step up a few inches, sometimes down six, and these huge gaps were always accompanied by apologetic grins and red faces. The elevator serviced the building on the corner of Magazine and Common Streets in the business district; a homeless shelter that was put out of commission by Katrina and lack of need. I went to the Brantley Center once a week at 5:30 in the morning—it was dark when I got there but bright when I left a couple of hours later, and I always felt like my time there existed in another reality that did not touch the world I lived in the rest of the day. I do not know how much water that building got—maybe none—and I do not know what business has replaced the Brantley or where Murphy, the front deskman, evacuated to, and I do not know if that elevator is still working. Hydraulic elevators use pressurized water that fills the cylinder at a rate fast enough to move the car 200 feet per minute. Now they don't even use water, but oil—smooth, black, thick, hard to clean.

I haven't been back to the AMC theatre in Fort Worth since that experience, but after the film Mom and I rode the escalator back up to the ground floor and she didn't even want to look at the elevator doors. The policeman who "rescued" us was wearing a helmet and biker shorts, and he commented that the elevator gets stuck all the time. I wonder who else had the same experience Mom and I did, how long they were stuck, if it was just the week before or the day before, or if it happened again on the same employee's first day of work. I doubt the next person quoted William Carlos Williams and I doubt they could guess how the elevator was powered.